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Organizing the Unemployed - Baltimore

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Organizing the Unemployed - Baltimore

Abstract

[Excerpt] Depression level unemployment has given rise to the biggest upsurge in organizing activity amongst the unemployed since the 1930's. While the level of the current movement is clearly not the same as during those times, a broad and rich range of experience has been gained over the last few years by the dozens of unemployed groups that have sprung up around the country. Recently, many of these groups met together in Erie, Pennsylvania, for the first conference of the newly formed National Unemployed Network.

Keywords

labor movement, unemployment, organizing, union, National Unemployed Network, unemployment benefits

Organizing the Unemployed—Baltimore

by Keith Brooks

Depression level unemployment has given rise to the biggest upsurge in organizing activity amongst the unemployed since the 1930's. While the level of the current movement is clearly not the same as during those times, a broad and rich range of experience has been gained over the last few years by the dozens of unemployed groups that have sprung up around the country. Recently, many of these groups met together in Erie, Pennsylvania, for the first conference of the newly formed National Unemployed Network.

These unemployed groups have used a wide range of strategies and tactics in fighting for the rights of the jobless—working in the unions, unemployment centers and communities; using petitions, picket lines and protests at mortgage foreclosures; and lobbying in the legislative arena. The bottom line has been to bring the unemployed themselves to life as a political force in the fight for jobs—or for the means to survive without one.

One of these groups is the Baltimore-based United Committee of Unemployed People (UCUP). UCUP is a grass-roots organization of and for the unemployed in Maryland. Our members are steel and auto workers, bottlemakers and fast food workers, union and non-union, black and white, men and women, blue and white collar and skilled and unskilled. With a paid membership of around 200 and an active core of 10-30 people depending on the issue, UCUP has put the unemployed on the political map in Baltimore.

The group was formed in July 1982 in response to the cutoff of Federal money to the state of Maryland for the 13 weeks Extended Benefit Program (EB). Motored by two laid-off steelworkers, a core

Keith Brooks is a member of USWA Local 2609, laid off from Sparrows Point [Maryland] Plant, Bethlehem Steel Corp. since December, 1981. He is the co-chair of the United Committee of Unemployed People (UCUP) in the Baltimore area.

of other unemployed union activists was quickly pulled together to organize and respond to this attack, which would have denied 11,000 people unemployment benefits. Through petitions and rallies at the unemployment centers, lobbying and other means, UCUP played a major role in pressuring the state to fund the money cut off by Reagan. Maryland was the only state to do so, despite dozens of others also being cut from the EB program.

Since that time, UCUP has gone on to become an active organization of the unemployed, taking on a broad range of issues. Hundreds of jobless people have come to our organization, many of them new to political activity. In addition to the initial successes that launched UCUP, the group has accomplished the following:

1. Successfully lobbied and fought to eliminate a technicality used to disqualify up to 10,000 people from receiving their full 13 weeks of benefits. As a result, an additional \$7,000,000 was allocated. UCUP was the only group to pick up on what was going on. UCUP blew the situation out into the open through a widely covered press conference that informed the unemployed of the change in the rules.
2. Initiated a piece of legislation known as the "Unemployed Citizens Bill of Rights," which made it as far as the full Senate floor in the state capitol under the sponsorship of two sympathetic Senators. The Bill was one of the most publicized and popularly supported bills to hit the legislature, and forced the issue of relief measures for the unemployed onto center stage. The campaign around the bill further consolidated UCUP's legitimacy and credibility as a spokesman for the unemployed in the area and helped create better conditions to continue the fight elsewhere.
3. Through our union members, UCUP has directly initiated resolutions resulting in a District-wide Steelworker Unemployment Assistance Project, an AFL-CIO Central Labor Council Project, as well as projects in a number of locals. Previous to UCUP's formation, there was virtually no union activity dealing with the problems of the laid-off members in the area.
4. Directly saved over a dozen houses of unemployed workers through negotiations with mortgage companies, public pressure, and the threat of protests.



5. Helped scores of people get late checks through our organizing at the unemployment centers. We have established official liaisons at the centers, including an open line to the executive director, to deal with problems we bring them. UCUP has been asked to submit suggestions for changes in eligibility requirements that last year resulted in 60,000 disqualifications. We also recently got a resolution passed by the Baltimore City Council calling on the state to clean up its act or assume liability for late charges on monthly bills caused by late unemployment checks.
6. Over the last few months, UCUP has held discussions with various interested parties that led to the city of Baltimore announcing a low- or no-cost health care plan for the unemployed. UCUP is also working with a number of city Health Centers in doing outreach to the unemployed.

How We Got Started

On July 21, 1982, when the Reagan Government announced that Maryland no longer qualified for the Extended Benefit program, it seemed a foregone conclusion that in 10 days thousands would

lose benefits. Even as national unemployment figures climbed towards the 10 per cent mark, state after state was being disqualified under new eligibility criteria that can only be described as diabolical. Under the new rules, people on the Extended Benefit program were no longer counted in the unemployment figures used to calculate a state's eligibility!

There had been little if any organizing activity amongst the unemployed. But something different was to happen in Maryland. A handful of people started organizing to fight back. Working independently of each other at first, Kwazi Nkrumah from Steelworker Local 14601 at Harbison Walker Refractory, and Keith Brooks from Local 2609 at Bethlehem Steel's Sparrows Point Plant contacted other laid-off union activists, called their union officials urging action, and registered protests with state and federal legislators. Paths soon crossed, and UCUP was formed.

There was a need for some kind of visible and vocal protest, and there were a number of favorable factors. Unemployment was going up, not down. A large number of people were affected all at once. There was extremely sympathetic media coverage on the effect of the cuts. The governor happened to be up for reelection in a few months. On top of all this, Maryland had a \$300 million surplus in its unemployment insurance fund. All this added up to the reasonable demand that the state fund the money cut off by the feds. In order to do that, the governor would have to call an emergency session of the legislature.

Right from the start, UCUP also made clear that more was at issue than the 13 weeks. We called for a freeze on mortgage foreclosures, evictions, repossessions and utility turnoffs, and urged the governor to declare a state of emergency due to the economic crisis.

Almost immediately, UCUP had a powerful ally in the state AFL-CIO. Responding to the growing outcry of laid-off union members, they sent a telegram to the governor urging him to call the special session—and backed it up by withholding their expected endorsement of him in the upcoming election. Our relationship with the AFL-CIO officials quickly developed. They lobbied effectively behind the scenes while we mobilized the unemployed and public opinion. Our growing strength amongst the unemployed was the key.

The upcoming election also proved a big lever in the battle. We invited the local media to a meeting with the Republican challenger for governor. With little to lose in this heavily Democratic state, he

endorsed our entire program. When this ran on the noon news, the incumbent governor was on the hot seat. Later that day the heat was turned up when a delegation of 15 people brought the same message to a meeting with the governor's top aides. The next day, almost one week after the cutoffs were announced, the governor called an emergency session. The first part of the battle was won.

UCUP held its first public meeting that night, attended by over 45 people. At the meeting the second part of the fight was planned—to make sure the bill for state funding passed, and to put pressure on the governor around the freezes. For the next ten days, UCUP organized wherever there was an opportunity to spread the word. Most successful was the organizing at the two main unemployment centers, where 1500 people signed our petitions in two days. We called a press conference at the center, went on radio talk shows and gave TV interviews. Newspaper articles played up the fact that the unemployed themselves were mobilizing. Aside from the emergency session itself, UCUP was the biggest news story of the week. By the day of the session, it was a foregone conclusion that the bill would pass. Even the Chamber of Commerce came out in favor of it. In just two weeks, we had turned a lost cause into a victory.

The effects of our organizing went beyond the state funding. Public attitudes about the problems of the unemployed had changed—particularly in the unions. Previously there was no activity in the unions dealing with the problems of the laid-off member, and in some cases union officials, actually opposed efforts by their membership to address the problem. Two months



*Keith Brooks testifies
at legislative hearing.*

before, alternate zone man Len Shindel and Brooks proposed at a meeting of USWA Local 2609 that a special meeting be called of laid off members to set up an unemployed committee. The motion was opposed by the local leadership on the pretext that they did not have a list of laid-off members! Even as mild a proposal as using the union newsletter to survey the problems of the thousands of laid off was shot down on the



excuse that it would violate the privacy of the members!

All this turned around, however, with the success of UCUP's mobilization and all the public attention it drew, and with a petition circulating in the mills calling for the special meeting. Local officials finally "saw the light" and called the meeting in September, drawing over 400 laid-off members and setting up a food committee still around today.

Also, in the midst of the fight for state EB funding, Nkrumah—working out of a local with more progressive leadership (USWA Local 14601)—attended a meeting of the District Steelworker body with the president of his local, Al Carroll. They put forward a motion calling for a district-wide relief effort to deal with the over 10,000 unemployed steelworkers. This resulted in a program of voluntary wage deductions by working members to help people with mortgage, utility, and other bills. During this period, Carroll appointed Nkrumah as a delegate from the local to the Baltimore Central Labor Council. The Executive Board of the CLC, knowing that a similar resolution was to be put forward, themselves put forward a proposal for an unemployment assistance project which is still functioning today.

Even with these initial successes under our belt, a lot of people thought (and some hoped) that UCUP was just a flash in the pan and that we would go away with the end of the battle for the funding. The next month, August, was spent planning the way forward. It was during this time that Cassandra Marshall, a former legislative worker in the state capitol, suggested that we translate

our program into a piece of legislation—what was to become the “Unemployed Citizens Bill of Rights.”

We came back strong in September with a meeting of 100 people. Phoning signers of the petitions, leafletting the centers, and media announcements paid off with a broad cross section of the unemployed attending. The meeting set up UCUP's organizational structure for the next six months. Four committees were set up: an unemployment center outreach committee, a labor outreach committee, a committee to develop the campaign around the unemployed bill of rights, and a survival committee to deal with individual problems like mortgages and evictions. Regular monthly public meetings were instituted, along with twice-monthly meetings of the steering committee, which was to be the policy-making body of the group. Overall, UCUP was to have two co-chairs.

The survival committee was to get its first case that night when unemployed steelworker Bruce Osman attended the meeting to see what could be done about saving his house. Through negotiating with his finance company, UCUP was able to secure a six month freeze on his payments, with the missed payments to be added onto the end of the mortgage.

Stage 2: The Unemployed Bill of Rights Campaign

As the different committees began to function, the campaign around the Unemployed Bill of Rights became the focus of UCUP activity for the next six months. Working with Marshall, who knew the ropes in the state legislature, and a group of law students and lawyers, a bill was drafted that would give the jobless more protection against mortgage foreclosures, evictions, utility shutoffs and repossessions. It also called for medical and legal care and job retraining. The protection of the bill would trigger in at a 7.2 per cent state unemployment rate, and would have covered all unemployed in its original version (the amended version that made it to the Senate floor covered only those out of benefits).

The bill called for a moratorium of 12 months for mortgage payments and six months for rent and repossessions. Missed payments were to be made up by extending the contract, so a 30-year mortgage would become a 31-year contract, but with the same number of payments. The amended version cut this to six months, called for half of the rent over a six-month period, and only applied to housing of 4 units or more.

One of the first questions we faced in developing the bill was

whether to go for a resolution, which would be a statement of general sentiment about protecting the rights of the jobless, or for a bill that would actually change policies affecting the unemployed. While a resolution would have been easier to pass, it would not have done much more than give some politicians the opportunity to grandstand their sympathy for the unemployed. We decided to go for the bill.

From the beginning, we faced the formidable task of establishing the bill's credibility by searching out previous legal and historical precedents. Even among some supporters in the legal profession there was doubt that our bill was constitutional, the main objection being that our call for a moratorium interfered with the contract clause.

Through the research of law student Al Landers, we found precedents for this approach. Moratorium laws in the country go back to the 1800's. The most significant example is the Minnesota Mortgage Moratorium law passed in 1933, and ruled constitutional by the Supreme Court in *Home Building Vs. Blaisdale*. The law was found to violate neither the contract nor the equal protection clause of the constitution. (True to tradition, Minnesota recently became the first state in the current depression to pass a mortgage moratorium law in the spring of 1983.)

Through further research, mainly coordinated by legal worker Joe Stewart, we found precedents for just about every other part of the bill. There have been rent eviction freezes in NYC in 1921, Chicago in 1933, and in the federal Soldier's and Sailor's Relief Act, which prohibits the eviction of dependents of active duty personnel. Utility turnoff moratoriums are presently in effect in Connecticut, West Virginia and elsewhere. A particular shot in the arm that changed more than a few attitudes that what we were doing wasn't a stunt or a symbolic effort was the action of a judge in Pennsylvania in December halting all mortgage foreclosures. Responding to pressure mobilized by the Mon Valley Unemployed Committee, a judge in Pennsylvania did it. Why can't the Maryland State Legislature?

None of this is to say that our bill didn't have legal flaws. Rentals are of a different contractual nature than mortgage contracts, and might be better approached through an emergency loan program. The loan fund approach is much more palatable to the banks and loan companies as they still get paid on time, whereas the moratorium and extension of payments in essence calls for a rescheduling of debts (which is done all the time for foreign



countries in debt.) If things continue to get worse, it wouldn't be surprising to see the banks and finance companies actually back such legislation. It's not an accident that this is the main form the recent flurry of relief legislation has taken on a state and federal level.

While it is crucial to come up with the best bill possible, do your homework on constitutional questions and fine tune your language, there is no "perfect bill." The Unemployed Bill of Rights was defeated not primarily out of any legal weakness, but because at this point the unemployed in Maryland are still not strong enough politically.

While legal work and drafting the bill were a big element of the campaign, the main activity of UCUP was in organizing grass roots support for the effort. The bill had tremendous popular support that is barely hinted at by a petition campaign at the unemployment centers that drew over 10,000 signatures. It received widespread media coverage, and was generally recognized as the only meaningful bill to deal with the immediate survival needs of the unemployed. The media coverage continued even weeks after its defeat as newspaper columnists blasted its opponents. The bill also had an impressive and broad range of endorsers, from the Baltimore City Council to the state and local AFL-CIO, Urban League, YWCA, housing and tenant groups, the main ministerial alliances in the area, and many more.

A lot of effort was also put into organizing a rally at the state capitol the day the bill came up for its hearing. Despite having the date changed on us at the last minute after two weeks of organizing, a respectable rally of close to 200 people finally did take place, with over 50 unemployed people testifying for the bill. A major disappointment, however, that undercut the potential strength of the whole movement around the bill was the refusal by

the state AFL-CIO to call out the ranks for the rally, despite our repeated urgings. While they would lobby for the bill in the halls of the state capitol, that was the limit of their active support.

Despite all the support and publicity, there were still doubts that the bill would ever make it out of committee. It was quite an upset, then, when the bill emerged from committee with a favorable report, and the upset continued once it hit the full senate. It took three days and three votes before the bill was finally defeated on March 31, 1983.

While the bill itself was defeated, the work around it was overwhelmingly positive and accomplished a number of goals. It forced the relief needs of the unemployed into the public eye, creating a groundswell of support beyond the unemployed. This was reflected in a public TV poll which showed 69 per cent of the people in favor of it. The campaign also further galvanized UCUP and established UCUP as a spokesman for the unemployed in the area. While we are all clear that legislation is not going to solve the problems of unemployment and the relief needs of the unemployed, it is an arena in which important gains can be made. It can create better conditions for continuing the struggle elsewhere.

The proof of this came the day after the defeat of the bill. Before we even had time to wind down from the intensity of the campaign, we received a phone call from Leroy Blackledge, an unemployed worker about to lose his house in four days. He heard of us through the media coverage of the bill, and needed help. There seemed little we could do—other than publicly announce plans for our first protest at a house auction.

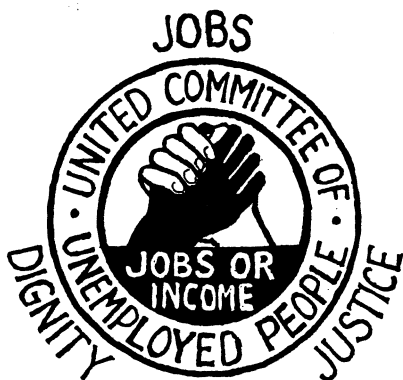
The media jumped all over it. They ran the story of Blackledge and his family of 7, the \$5,000 he owed in back payments, and our vow to take action. By the day of the auction, he had recieved all the money he needed to pay his debts and he had a job offer as a result of the publicity.

Any doubts that UCUP "would survive the defeat" of the bill were quickly dispelled. UCUP was back in business. A few days later, we were back in the public eye again through our organizing and testimony at public hearings on proposed utility rate increases.

UCUP's Current Work

As much as we try to prioritize our work, experience has shown us that it is ultimately conditions that determine what we take up at any given time. Flexibility has been a key part of our approach. Overall, though, our work breaks down around the following:

1. Work around mortgage foreclosures. After the Blackledge case, we were contacted by a number of others in the same situation.
2. Unemployment Center Project—dealing with everything from late checks to disqualifications, and a possible voter registration drive at the centers. We recently had two big successes. The first was our uncovering of the change in the technicality that was disqualifying up to 10,000 people from receiving their full 13 weeks of benefits. The other advance was in getting the Baltimore City Council to hold public hearings on the problems of late checks. We brought over 30 unemployed people to testify at those hearings. As a result, the Council passed a resolution urging the state to assume liability for late charges on monthly bills caused by late unemployment checks. We have also lined up state legislators who will introduce similar legislation in the next state session.
3. Upcoming city elections. UCUP has developed a program and a view towards upcoming mayoral and city council elections. Our bottom line is to push the issue of unemployment as the number one issue of the campaign. We have developed a program calling for a city bond issue to finance low- or no-interest loans to unemployed homeowners, a rent



control law, opposition to enterprise zones and workfare and other points. The bond issue proposal has been endorsed by the current mayor's chief opponent, a black judge running on a progressive platform, and the main contender for the city council president seat. UCUP is also holding a candidates night over the summer, and there is a possibility that one of us might run for a council seat.

4. Health Care. We work with health centers which are receiving federal jobs bill money, and the city health care project. We are also on an advisory panel to a state joint legislative task force on health care for the unemployed.
5. Participating in the August 27 coalition for the March on Washington for Jobs, Peace and Freedom. We also are organizing in Baltimore for a day of protest on July 27 called by the National Unemployed Network against the loss of benefits by over 1,000,000 people this summer.

Some Problems and Weaknesses

UCUP has had some amazing successes in the year we have been around. Through a tremendous amount of hard work by a dedicated core of people who don't know how to stop, small forces have been changed into big forces. Obviously much has to do with the volatility of the issues. But audacity and "striking while the iron is hot," combined with a concrete program coming out of the needs of the unemployed, have been consistent ingredients in moving our cause ahead.

On the other hand, nothing—with extremely few exceptions—has come easy. By its very nature, the unemployed are an unstable constituency, and high turnover is an occupational hazard. Since we began, over 50 people have gone



through our steering committee (which at any given time ranges from 8 to 15 people). The main reason people leave is job related. They either return to work, to school, or move. There's also a real dynamic where UCUP draws some of the most aggressive, articulate members of the working class, the type of people most likely to get a job. All this has meant a big emphasis on replenishing our ranks, usually with success.

The key to this has been two factors: being active amongst the unemployed around specific issues, mainly at the unemployment centers and in the unions; and bringing people we meet directly into our activities and to public membership meetings. Each of these public meetings, which usually draw about 50 people, results in two to four new members for our steering committee. And an important factor in our work at the unemployment centers is the fact that, thanks to the work of some local activists around unemployment back in the 70's, we have the legal right to go into the centers and onto the lines to talk to people.

Our base in the unions, particularly the large steel and auto locals, has also been instrumental in both bringing new members into UCUP and in making the unions themselves more responsive to the issue of unemployment. The food committee of USWA Local 2609, for instance, in which our labor outreach chairman Len Shindel has played a big role, has continually generated new members for UCUP.

With the high turnover, it has been crucial to have a relatively more stable core of 5 to 7 people to provide the political experience and continuity necessary to keep UCUP moving. The co-chair of UCUP, Nkrumah, and Shindel have been called back to work; while they continue to do UCUP work, it clearly is not at the same level. Two other key members of the steering committee—Bob Repoley who played a big role in putting out the first issue of our newsletter, and Nancy Sparks—recently moved as a result of not finding work in the area. With our core weakened, training the new people who continually come forward has become an even more urgent task.

We have handled this task of training new people with mixed results. There is little problem in new people coming forward, nor in a number quickly developing into spokespeople and organizers for the group. And the enthusiasm for fighting back spreads to other areas as well. Recently steering committee member Linda Jarrard of USWA Local 2609 organized a protest of 100 people against bad housing conditions at her apartment complex. A big

part of UCUP's appeal is that by and large it is a group of people who have never really been politically active before.

At the same time, though, we have not paid enough attention to drawing out a broader political view on the causes of the crisis, who's to blame, and what kind of long range solutions are needed. In the course of our daily organizing, we have not yet developed enough of a collective understanding and response to questions around foreign imports, immigrant labor, and similar questions.

Another inherent problem of unemployed organizing is in handling the relationship between service activities, like helping individuals who come to us with mortgages problems, and political action. Overall, UCUP has dealt with this fairly well; many of our key activists have been people we helped. Our approach is to make as much of an issue around each case we take up, fighting both to win (which we do fairly successfully) and using it to highlight the overall problem and the need for broader solutions.

For instance, our first step with people who come to us is to get them to contact both their local and state representatives and the media, trying to get as much attention to their situation as possible. When the politicians get a call every time a constituent's check is late or a home is threatened, they get moving—if only to get us off their backs. And then UCUP itself will directly come in and play a role, whether through negotiations, phone calls, or protests. While UCUP does a lot of service activity, we are clearly not a social work agency, and our emphasis is on the people themselves getting involved in both solving their own problems and helping UCUP to organize.

Another big part of UCUP's appeal is that we are clearly a multiracial group: Black and white together, "people helping people." It's also a big part of the media coverage and attraction to us. We are the "new poor," defined as stable blue-collar workers, not used to being pushed down so hard and so long, and organizing to fight for our rights. While attendance at our public meetings is well-integrated, there has been more of a problem at different times in the makeup of the steering committee.

Being heavily based in the "new poor" means that by and large UCUP has not addressed the issue of the "old poor"—the hard core unemployed living in the area's hardest hit black neighborhoods. There the unemployment rate is at least double the average and goes over 50 per cent for black youth. Many have not worked in years, or ever worked at all, and many are on welfare. As the thousands of people laid off over the last two years



exhaust their unemployment benefits and still cannot find jobs, the link between unemployed organizing and welfare organizing gets closer and closer, and is something UCUP will have to address.

Conclusion

Despite some of the problems and weaknesses, UCUP will continue as long as there is a need for a political advocacy organization of the unemployed in Baltimore. While we have seen a slight upswing in the economy affect the core of the group, it can hardly be described as a "recovery" when the unemployment rate is expected to stay above 9 per cent for another 4 or 5 years. And there is certainly as much reason to think that things could get worse rather than better.

Overall, the successes of UCUP are in part a reflection of the tremendous vacuum that existed in fighting for the needs and interests of the unemployed. Once organized, real short-term gains have been made, while at the same time helping to lay the basis for a mass movement of the unemployed as part of the resistance of the working class to being driven back half a century.

The unemployed movement that has sprung up over the last two years has developed separately from the official top trade union leadership in this country, and partly in reaction to an initial lack of responsiveness on their part to dealing with the issue.

Organizing the unemployed is a task that will remain through the 80's. The work of UCUP and other unemployed groups around the country is aimed at mobilizing a traditionally unorganized and politically inactive sector of the population to fight for our rights and defend our interests. The unemployed are coming to life.